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Some remarks on a rock drawing from Gebel Tjauti

After the first volume of the very well documented and presented rock inscriptions and drawings from the Theban Desert Road Survey was published (Darnell 2002, 2002a; Friedman & Hendrickx 2002), a stimulating discussion arose focusing on one of the tableaux (Kahl 2003; Hendrickx & Friedman 2003). On the basis of the suggested interpretation, recently a quite detailed historical scene was presented (van Wetering 2005) which is, to be sure, hardly substantiated by any archaeological evidence. Although the interpretation of the rock engraving suggested by J.C. Darnell, R. Friedman and S. Hendrickx is very convincing and plausible on first glance, there are some details which give rise to doubts, if this is in fact the only way to understand the tableau. The aim of this paper is not to deny the proposed interpretation – it may be well right – but to point out that other possibilities of interpretation may not to be ruled out completely. The uncertainties of the suggested interpretation should be kept in mind before further far-reaching conclusions are built on it.

The focus of interest is Rock Inscription 1 (Darnell 2002a: pl. 9-11), on which several falcons, storks and other signs as well as four male figures are depicted. Two of them carry sticks and a third one, bald-headed, holds a mace in his left hand and leads a long-haired prisoner with arms tied behind his back by a rope (Fig. 1). Interpreting the tableau, the authors and other colleagues widely agree that most of the separate drawings and signs belong together as part of one and the same composition which celebrates, perhaps even in scenic order, a victorious military event (Darnell 2002: 132, 142; Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 14, 17; Kahl 2003: 49; cf. also Wilkinson 2000: 386, Campagno 2002a: 689; Gilbert 2004: 109). As some of the depictions may be paralleled by ink inscriptions on pottery jars and incisions on bone labels from the late predynastic tomb U-j at Abydos, the Gebel Tjauti tableau was dated approximately to that time, i.e. to Naqada IIIA1 (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 11, 16; Kahl 2003: 49). Focusing

on the falcon above the scorpion in the lower register, Friedman and Hendrickx understood the tableau to be a depiction of a victorious campaign of a king from Abydos (perhaps even the owner of tomb U-j) against Naqada (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 17; Hendrickx & Friedman 2003: 95). Kahl identifies the bucranium behind the prisoner as an emblem of the goddess Bat, i.e. the symbol of the later 7th Upper Egyptian nome. He considers the scorpion and the falcon in the lower register as evidence for an involvement of Hierakonpolis. Therefore, he concludes that this is a victory of a ruler from Hierakonpolis against his counterpart from Hu (Kahl 2003: 49; against this interpretation Hendrickx & Friedman 2003: 95-100).



Fig. 1. Gebel Tjauti Rock Inscription 1 (after Darnell 2002a, pl. 11).

Apart from this different interpretation, as important it is, a closer look at some details reveals some more general questions concerning the homogeneity and the dating of the tableau, most of which were indeed also noted by the authors. The suggested interpretation is based on the assumption that all separate

depictions are part of a homogenous, planned composition and were incised more or less contemporaneously. This idea seems to be confirmed by the arrangement of the drawings within two strips or "registers", one below the other, and the fact that all depicted creatures are looking in the same direction. Only the antelopes in the right portion of the upper register seem to belong to an older phase of representations (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 11), and one of the falcons is considered as a possible later addition (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 11-12). Although it may well have been the case that the entire picture was executed nearly at the same time, it may not be ruled out that the drawings were incised successively. It is not possible to distinguish between 5000 years old incisions which were executed within a time-span of 50, 100 or even 200 years on the basis of the patina. The orientation of the incisions is also no argument for their contemporaneousness. The antelopes are looking to the right likewise, and they are even incised at a similar depth (Hendrickx & Friedman 2003: 11). Furthermore, a closer inspection of the images in detail reveals many more stylistic differences than similarities. This does not only concern the depictions of the humans, but also the falcons in the right upper portion of the panel. In this case, the different shapes and internal patterns of the birds in connection with their arrangement could indicate different aspects of kingship (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 14) but one must not exclude the possibility that they were incised at different times by several artists.

Stylistically, this group of falcons is difficult to connect with the storks depicted beneath, and with the entire lower part of the tableau. The group of the two storks beside a building(?) appears very homogeneously by itself, although the overlapping of the signs seems to indicate a more successive rather than contemporaneous incision (Hendrickx & Friedman 2003: 11-12). In contrast to the upper register with its well arranged and dispersed placement of the elements, the lower part of the panel appears overcrowded and much more ambiguous. This is certainly partly due to the bad state of preservation of some of the signs, but the narrow arrangement of signs around the prisoner scene and the unlucky positioning of the stork between the upright figures is embarrassing within the frame of a planned composition. The bevelled posture of the stork may be explained by clumsy workmanship; but would an artist not try to avoid such a density of signs, if space is available, in order to make his drawing clearer and more impressive, especially if it is such an important scene like the seizure of an enemy? Therefore, the narrow arrangement of the figures may be accidental, and we are indeed looking at remains of more than one layer of depictions. The bucranium on a pole (which is cut by the rope of the prisoner), the mountain(?) sign, and some elements which are no longer identifiable may well have belonged to an earlier phase. If the stork with the snake was also an element of

this earlier layer remains uncertain – at least there are no stylistic similarities to both storks depicted in the upper register.

With these observations taken into consideration, it seems not unlikely that the tableau was not a homogeneous composition but in fact “only” a gathering of signs and drawings which have been incised successively during a longer span of time. Nevertheless, during subsequent additions, the rock artists in some cases may well have been aware of drawings which were already present, and may have even used them as elements of their own messages which they wanted to transmit.

If so, as a consequence, we have not to search for a distinct date of the inscription but for a time-span. The detailed analysis of the Gebel Tjauti drawings by Friedman and Hendrickx revealed that most of the signs are already known from earlier times, such as Naqada IIC/D or even from late Naqada I (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 11-16). For example, the male figures holding a stick have been compared to the wall painting from Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis, which dates to Naqada IIc, and their close similarity is stated. The scene with the prisoner parallels paintings on C-ware jars dating as early as Naqada I (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 13, 16). On two jars from Abydos (Fig. 2 and 3), like on the Gebel Tjauti tableau, a bald or short-haired conqueror (often adorned with feathers) is depicted with a mace, leading long-haired, nude and fettered prisoners on a rope. The upright position of the prisoner from Gebel Tjauti is similar to C-ware depictions, whilst later the prisoners are more often depicted in kneeling or sitting positions symbolising their total defeat. This posture is not only represented in the painted tomb at Hierakonpolis, but also on several decorated knife handles and other ivory objects (cf. Whitehouse 2002: 429, fig. 1; 434, fig. 4 and 5; Dreyer 1999: 220, fig. 10; Petrie 1901: pl. IV, 20). Indeed, the position of the prisoner is not an unequivocal argument for dating, as standing or walking prisoners are found also in later times (cf. Quibell 1900: pl. XII, 4; pl. XV, 1, 2, 4; Petrie 1901: pl. IIIA, 1 and IV, 12; 1953: pl. E).

Another sign important for the interpretation of the tableau should also be mentioned, and this is the scorpion. Its representation on the rock tableau resembles those of earlier rather than later depictions (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 15, note 74). All early representations known so far show the scorpion seen from above (e.g. Fig. 4a and b [Naqada I]; Fig. 4c-e [Naqada IIC/D]), like on the Gebel Tjauti tableau, whilst in later times the insect is mostly depicted from the side (e.g. Fig. 5; cf. Hendrickx, Huyge & Adams 1997/1998: 25-31, for a collection of further evidences). Therefore, the two drawings which are important for the significance of the tableau seem to be stylistically much closer to early representations than to the Naqada III date suggested by the authors.

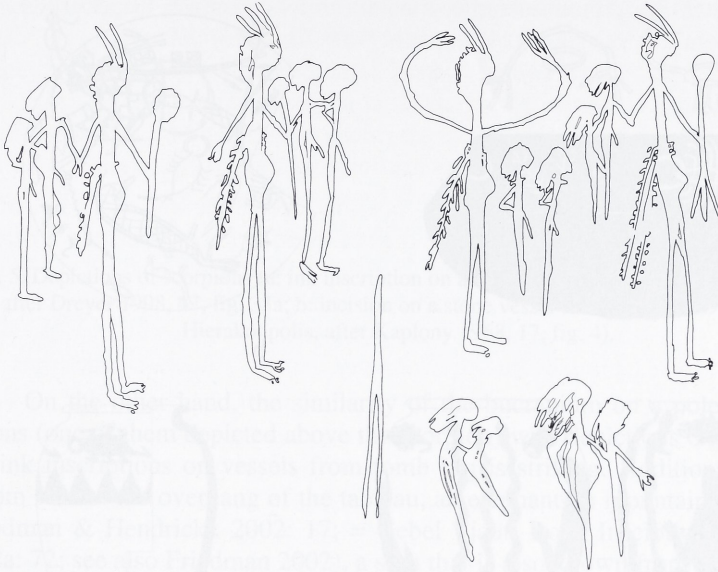


Fig. 2. Drawing on a C-Ware jar from tomb U-239 at Abydos (after Dreyer et al. 1998, fig. 13).

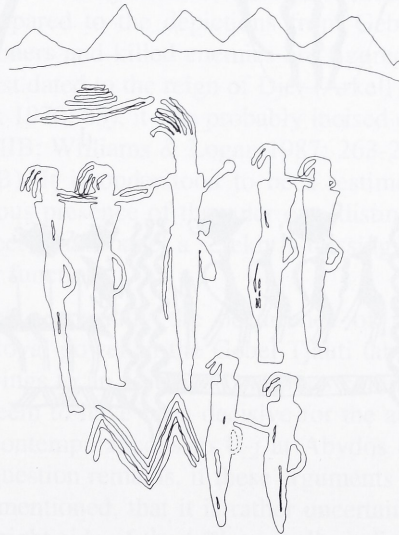


Fig. 3. Part of a drawing on a C-ware jar from tomb U-415 at Abydos (after Dreyer et al. 2003, fig. 5).

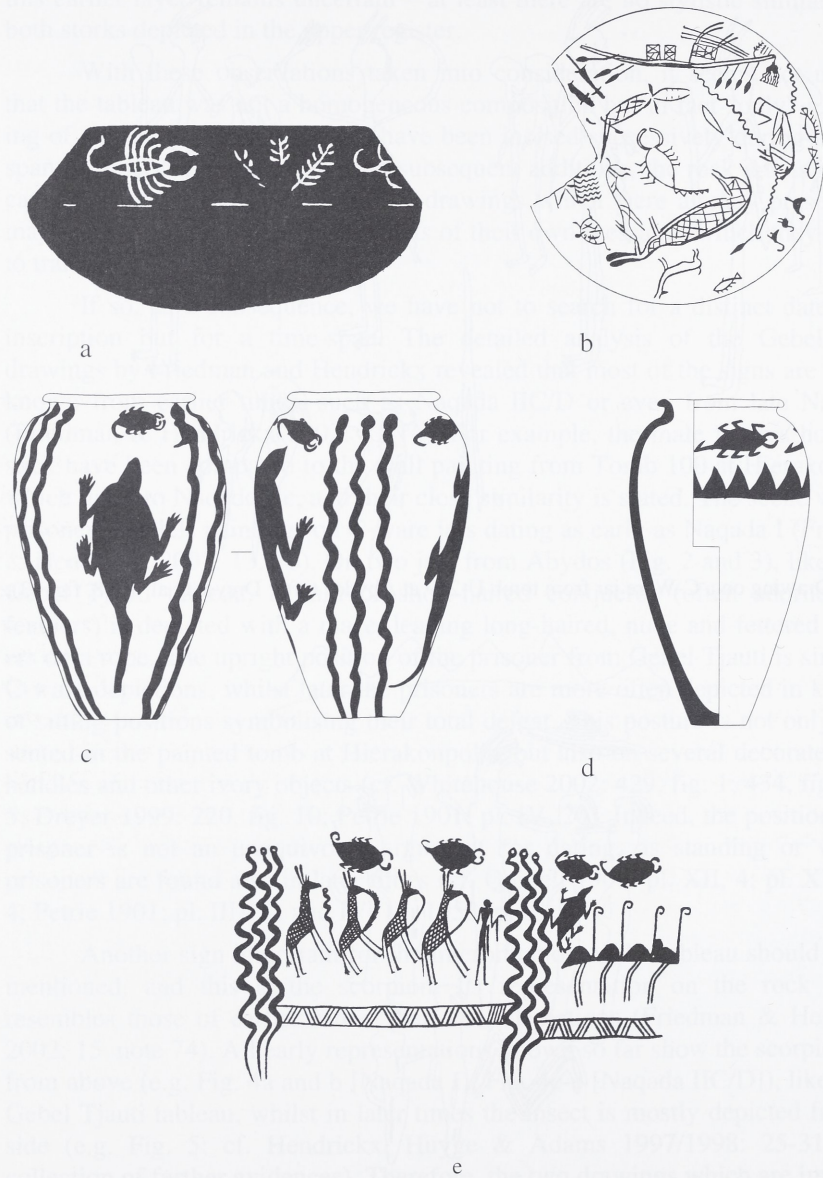


Fig. 4. Representations of scorpions on C-ware (a, b) and D-ware jars (c-e)
 (a: after Petrie 1921, pl. XXIII, C66M; b: after Petrie 1920, pl. XXIII, 2;
 c, d: after Payne 1993, fig. 49, 918 and 919; e: after Scharff 1931, 150, fig. 58

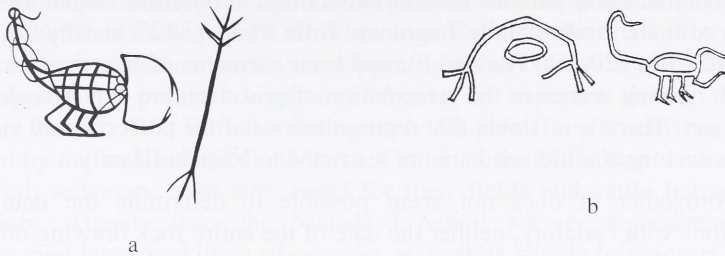


Fig. 5. Depictions of scorpions (a: ink inscription on a W-ware jar from tomb U-j at Abydos, after Dreyer 1998, 47, fig. 33a; b: incision on a stone vessel from the Main Deposit at Hierakonpolis, after Kaplony 1968, 17, fig. 4).

On the other hand, the similarity of the bucranium on a pole and of the falcons (one of them depicted above the scorpion) with depictions on bone labels and ink inscriptions on vessels from tomb U-j is striking. Additionally, on the bottom side of the overhang of the tableau, an elephant on mountains is depicted (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 17; = Gebel Tjauti Rock Inscription 28, Darnell 2002a: 72; see also Friedman 2002), a sign that is also known from U-j. All these signs may be read as early royal names (Dreyer 1995: 52-56; 1998: 178) or at least interpreted as powerful symbols of the ruler. Additionally, the Gebel Tjauti tableau may be compared to the depictions from Gebel Soliman near Buhen, where not only prisoners and killed enemies are figured, but also a serekh with falcon is present. First dated to the reign of Djer (Arkell 1950: 28-30; against this dating already Helck 1970: 85), it was probably incised during the late Predynastic period (Naqada IIIB; Williams & Logan 1987: 263-264; Murnane 1987: 282-285, fig. 1A and 1B). It is understood to be a testimony of royal power and indicates the victorious presence of the ruler or a distinct victory in this region. Although in the Gebel Tjauti panel a serekh is missing, the parallels from tomb U-j suggest a similar function.

These parallels, especially the occurrence of royal names or at least symbols indicating royal power in the Gebel Tjauti tableau, and their combination with other drawings to an assumed conscious composition of programmatic royal iconography seem to have been decisive for the authors to date the depictions more or less contemporaneous to U-j at Abydos (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 11, 16). The question remains, if these arguments are sufficient for dating. Firstly, it has to be mentioned, that it is rather uncertain if the scorpion and the falcon on the lower right side of the tableau really indicate a royal name (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 14-15; Kahl 2003: 51; 2003a: 116-122, 127-129; cf. also Breyer 2002). Secondly, it is to consider that programmatic depictions celebrating the ruler or king are already known from the painted tomb at Hierakonpolis,

from decorated knife handles (among others, see Williams & Logan 1987: 253-272; cf. also the knife handle fragments from tomb U-127 at Abydos, Dreyer 1999: 205-208, 220, fig. 10a und b), and some elements of later royal iconography, like hunting scenes or the presentation of prisoners, are depicted already on C-ware jars. There is no doubt that representations of the powerful and victorious ruler have a long tradition and are not restricted to Naqada III only.

Altogether, it does not seem possible to determine the date of the inscriptions with certainty, neither the date of the entire rock drawing nor that of its elements. If it is not understood as a conscious composition, and considering the evidence that many motives are already known from earlier times, first of its drawings or sign groups – apart from the antelopes which are clearly older – may have been incised already during Naqada I, with subsequent additions until Naqada III.

Finally, another question concerns the general interpretation of the tableau. So far all scholars seem to agree that the Gebel Tjauti panel is a symbolic depiction of a military conflict between Upper Egyptian proto-kingdoms, either showing the victory of a ruler from Abydos (Friedman & Hendrickx 2002: 17-18) or from Hierakonpolis (Kahl 2003: 53-54). The background of this interpretation is the idea of a rivalry that existed between the three main proto-kingdoms of the Naqada-Culture situated around Abydos, Naqada and Hierakonpolis (Kemp 1989: 31-35, fig. 8), including the military conquest of neighbouring settlement centres. This picture was designed as a model to explain the predynastic developments in the Upper Egyptian Nile valley which finally led to the emergence of the Egyptian state. Although this idea has been generally accepted (among others see recently Wilkinson 2000: 382-386; Campagno 2002, 2002a; Gilbert 2004: 109), the archaeological evidence is still missing. The existence of several large settlement centres in Upper Egypt is well attested, but the archaeological record does not tell us anything about their relationship to each other. The same is true for the differences in the geographical and chronological distribution of elite tombs that are often cited as evidence of political development. Changes in the structure of cemeteries may mirror developments within a settlement or a region, but they do not reveal the reason for it. A military defeat would only be one possibility. The wealth and importance of a village, town or region could be just as much affected by other circumstances like economic disasters which, for example, could be caused by the shifting of trade routes or trade interests due to exhausted sources of raw materials.

Until recently, only little is known about the political organization of the settled Middle and Upper Egyptian Nile valley. Considering sealings, seal impressions (for example Hartung 1998) and depictions resembling later pharaonic iconography, it may be assumed that somehow centralized economic and admin-

istrative structures corresponding to a hierarchic system of political power, were already established in Naqada IIC/D. Therefore, if one supposes a military rivalry that led to such structures within the Upper Egyptian Nile valley, serious fights and struggles for political hegemony should be expected during the time preceding Naqada IIC. But also during early Naqada II such activities are not indicated by the archaeological evidence. Certainly, the Naqadians were not only a peaceful, sedentary tribe who cared for their fields and cattle but a violent community. Already from the Naqada I period we see representations of prisoners, and later the killing of enemies as well as people bringing tributes to the ruler. Traces of violence have been attested most recently by anthropological evidence (Dougherty & Friedman 2005).

On the other hand, the remains of the Naqada-Culture in the Middle and Upper Egyptian Nile valley provide a very uniform picture. This concerns not only the material culture but also the social, cultural and religious background of the society as far it is indicated by the archaeological records. Beside the local production of common pottery and stone implements which mirrors regional differences (for example Finkenstaedt 1980, 1985; Holmes 1989; Friedman 1994; 2000), there seems to have existed a common distribution network for more valuable products like stone vessels, palettes, fine worked flint knives, copper implements etc. These products, most likely manufactured in special workshops, were distributed throughout the entire Nile valley for the demands of the local elites. Furthermore, the similar arrangement and equipment of Naqadian tombs throughout the Upper Egyptian Nile valley is rather striking, as well as the occurrence of similar symbols and signs on painted pottery and as decorative motifs on various objects. This uniformity points to similar cultic practices and a common ideological and religious background for the entire area, which testifies a distinct Naqadian cultural and geographical identity. On the basis of this argument, it is highly questionable that the prisoners depicted on knife handles and other related objects are defeated people from the neighbouring village or town. In contrast to the ruler, these underdogs are always characterized as the "other", i.e. as foreigners with long straggly hair and/or beard, not belonging to the Naqadian community. It is quite unlikely that the same type of prisoner depicted on an object found at Abydos represented defeated people from Naqada or Hierakonpolis, and in Hierakonpolis captives from Abydos. Even if regarded as an enemy, a captured person from a neighbouring village or town would have been considered as a member of the same culture and not as a foreigner. Although the image of the naked, long-haired prisoner received an iconic meaning in later times, in the early depictions it is much more likely that the figured persons with their different appearance were foreigners who existed in reality. Frictions and occasional fights between Naqadians are not to be excluded, many of the common local issues were probably decided through the use of violence.

But for the entire polity, these struggles seem to have played only a minor role, at least they were not considered worth the depiction on elite objects. For this purpose, victories in conflicts with other ethnic groups may have had a more general importance, and were, as such, more suitable for the celebration of the power and the glory of a Naqadian ruler. Later evidence seems to confirm this consideration. Since Early Dynastic times, and especially in pharaonic depictions, the defeated are not only characterized as foreigners by their different appearance but often a name is added to indicate their non-Egyptian origin. In other cases, foreigners may be identified by special details of the drawing. For example, on labels from the reign of Narmer, men are shown bringing vessels in a devotional position (Petrie 1901: pl. IIIA, 2; IV, 6 and 15; Spencer 1980: pl. 50, no. 465). Although no name is added to these individuals they may be identified of Southern Levantine origin according to the shapes of the vessels they are carrying (Amiran 1969).

Unfortunately, in earlier representations neither names nor other helpful details are found. On the Abydos jars (Fig. 2 and 3), signs seem to appear beside the prisoners which might be symbols pointing to their origin. One of them resembles the later mountain sign, but the others are not identifiable. Therefore, the only possible approach to an identification is to consider the geographical location of the settled area, the historical situation and the connections between adjacent regions, as far as they are known. Apart from the assumed rivalry between Naqadians discussed above, there are only few possibilities. For Naqada I, military expeditions to Lower Egypt, or even into Palestine seem to be rather unlikely. Unfortunately, we neither have an idea about the interrelations of the Naqada-Culture to the Nile valley neighbours in the south, nor to remaining groups of the Badari Culture. Alternatively, we should look to other nomadic tribes which lived in the Eastern and Western Desert. Especially in extremely dry years, desert dwellers may have been forced to enter the Nile valley to survive. To find food for themselves and fodder for their herds they may have tried to loot fields or storage facilities in the Nile valley, accepting the risk of being captured. There may have been differences how the Naqadians as a sedentary community dealt with nomadic groups arriving from the Eastern or the Western desert. The Eastern desert was the source of most of the raw materials used by the Naqadians for luxurious products, like different kinds of rock, semiprecious stones, minerals, etc. The Western desert must have been of much less interest, as almost no raw materials were found there. The exchange of raw materials and agricultural products of the Nile valley was most likely the main basis of contact to the east, although less peaceful expeditions are not to be ruled out. Such economic relations may also have been helpful in cases of emergency. In contrast, people entering the Nile valley from the Western desert had not much to offer in exchange for food and survival. In this case, the contact may have been much

more violent. It was perhaps from this region, immediately adjoining the main settlement centres on the western bank of the Nile, where Naqadian village life was at times put at risk. Increasing aridity during the predynastic period may have greatly added to such conflicts. The necessity to defend the villages and towns of the Naqada-Culture against nomadic groups arriving from the desert (i.e. their protection against the “chaotic powers” of the desert which disturb and endanger the well-arranged sedentary life), would have been a problem that concerned the entire Nile valley. Consequently, victories against intruders, if true or not, would have been worth to be depicted on elite objects in order to describe and celebrate the power of a ruler. Therefore, it seems not unlikely, that the figured prisoners on the C-ware jars, and perhaps also on the knife handles, represent captured desert dwellers who were caught after they had entered the Nile valley.

Returning to the Gebel Tjauti tableau, we should consider the possibility that not a victory of a Naqada-ruler against a neighbouring counterpart is depicted but the capture of a desert dweller by a Naqada-chief. The drawing – maybe a tale of a real event or a propagandistic icon – could have been a mark to indicate the extent of the hinterland claimed by the Naqadians. It may have served as a warning against people who were going to penetrate into the area. The placement of the rock drawing at a prominent position on a path leading down from the desert plateau into a wadi open to the Nile valley would have been well-selected for such a purpose. The other signs of the tableau could have had a similar function, and especially the stork with the snake, symbolizing the defeat of the chaos, seems to fit well to such a purpose. The number and diversity of the signs may mirror chronological differences as well as the overlapping of several spheres of influence in the Gebel Tjauti region. Perhaps, Rock drawing 1 may even be regarded as a kind of predecessor to Rock drawing 2 (Darnell 2002a: 19-24) on which falcons and serekhs with falcons are depicted (Fig. 6). It dates perhaps to the reign of Narmer, and it has been suggested that it may have been a kind of land or border mark (Friedman 2002: 20, 24).

To summarize, despite the splendid documentation of the Gebel Tjauti rock drawings, their interpretation remains quite difficult. Although a convincing interpretation was suggested which fits well into our historical picture of the late predynastic period, some uncertainties remain. Other possibilities of interpretation cannot be strictly excluded and they should be at least kept in mind. When using rock art as evidence for historical conclusions, we have to be careful not to overemphasize the apparent clearness of information which such drawings provide.

Regrettably, Lech Krzyżaniak cannot contribute anymore to this discussion which, I am sure, would have found his interest.

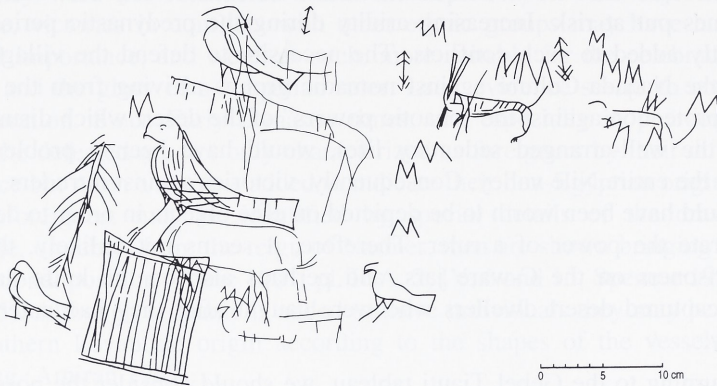


Fig. 6. Gebel Tjauti Rock Inscription 2 (after Darnell 2002a, pl. 12).

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This rock drawing has been an inspiration to generations of scholars and the initiator of the Hierakonpolis Excavations at Abydos in Egypt which opened a myriad of research into the study of early civilisation. The Metropolitan Knife Handle inspired the legend of Narmer being a pharaoh who not only the administrator but also the creator of the first civilisation in Mesopotamia. I thank

Introduction

The conceptualisation of ancient Egyptian rulers in terms of a linear sequence of dynasties, as done by Manetho (Wadell 1946) is unknown from the ancient Egyptian sources (Gardiner, Perducci & Janssen 1999: 1-10). Although it does not deny their contribution to the grouping of kings on such King